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Author/s:

Holas Allimant, I

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“I’m telling you things nobody wants to hear”: Pablo Chill-E, Chilean trap & *música urbana* between material excess and urban realism

“Te estoy diciendo cosas que nadie quiere escuchar”: Pablo Chill-E, el trap chileno y la música urbana, entre el realismo urbano y el exceso materialista

Israel Holas Allimant
Spanish & Latin American Studies,
Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6763-1646>
israel.holas@unimelb.edu.au

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Abstract: This article explores how Pablo Chill-E’s career as a trap and *música urbana* artist creates a poetics of contradiction that is profoundly linked to the contemporary Chilean experience. This contradiction addresses the tension between, on one hand, the artist’s articulation of a fierce critique of the Chilean neoliberal present as one increasingly characterized by inequality and corruption, and on the other, the appeal to materialistic discourses which are centred on the glorification of individual entrepreneurship as an expression of hip-hop’s “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2009, 16-20). This article focusses on a selection of songs to argue that Chill-E’s seemingly contradictory materialist aesthetic of excess combines with a visceral urban realism that reveals the fault-lines of Chile’s neoliberal experiment and gives voice to those marginalised by it.

Keywords: Pablo Chill-E, *música urbana*, poetics of trap, urban truth-telling, capitalist realism.

Resumen: Este artículo explora cómo en la carrera del artista de trap y de música urbana, Pablo Chill-E, se crea una poética de la contradicción profundamente ligada a la experiencia contemporánea chilena. Esta contradicción aborda la tensión entre, por un lado, la articulación por parte del artista de una crítica feroz al presente neoliberal chileno, cada vez más caracterizado por la desigualdad y la corrupción, y, por otro lado, el recurso a discursos materialistas centrados en la glorificación del emprendimiento individual como expresión del “realismo capitalista” del hip-hop (Fisher 2009, 16-20). Este artículo se centra en una selección de canciones para sostener que la aparentemente contradictoria estética materialista del exceso de Chill-E se combina con un realismo urbano visceral que revela las fisuras del experimento neoliberal chileno y le da voz a quienes han sido marginados por este mismo.

Palabras clave: Pablo Chill-E, *música urbana*, poética trap, realismo-urbano, realismo-capitalista.

This article explores the poetics of trap and *música urbana*¹ in contemporary Chile via the career arc of Pablo Chill-E (Pablo Acevedo Leiva, 2000-), one of the major

¹ Following Castro (2019), Suárez (2020) and Luque (2024), I use the term trap to refer to artists known for their work in the trap genre, and *música urbana* to refer to other genres which have been influenced by trap.



exponents and progenitors of trap in Chile (Molina 2020), and a frequent collaborator with *música urbana* artists. In recent years, trap and *música urbana* have undergone a quantitative boom in popularity, moving from the geographic and socioeconomic margins of society to the very centre of pop-culture consumption (Molina 2020; Villanueva 2023). Since 2022, it has dominated the charts produced by the *Observatorio Digital de la Música Chilena*² (ODMC), with nine out of ten artists polled for popularity belonging to the *música urbana* umbrella genre in 2022 and 2023 (Villanueva 2023). In those same years, Chile’s national broadcaster TVN (*Televisión Nacional*) produced the series *Urbanos: del barrio al éxito*, which included 10 episodes of interviews with prominent *música urbana* artists, tracing their background, their successes, pitfalls and personal struggles. On streaming platforms, music-based programs like La Junta interview artists associated with *música urbana*, to a following of millions of viewers. In the first half of 2025, all of the top ten genres in Chile by average popularity fall under the umbrella of *música urbana*, and many are influenced by the aesthetics of trap music.

Clasificaciones				
Artistas por seguidores	Artistas por popularidad	Artistas por oyentes	Artistas por % de seguidores	Artistas por % en popularidad
Artistas por % de oyentes	Géneros por seguidores	Géneros por popularidad promedio	Géneros por artistas	
Top ... +				
#	Género	Popularidad promedio		
1	reggaeton	70.5		
2	argentine trap	67.0		
3	rkt	65.4		
4	reggaeton mexa	65.0		
5	turreo	62.3		
6	drill chileno	61.0		
7	urbano chileno	59.3		
8	trap chileno	54.0		
9	grupera	48.0		
10	chilean mambo	47.2		

Figure 1: Top 10 genres according to the ODMC, 26/03/2025.
 Source: <https://www.odmc.cl/#/>

In 2023, trap and *música urbana* were consecrated at the very heart of Chile’s mainstream pop-culture landscape when Polimá Westcoast, one of the few national artists to be signed to a traditional major-label, was invited to perform in the *Festival Internacional de la Canción de Viña del Mar*, where he invited Pablo Chill-E to perform their 2019 hit collaboration, “My Blood”. This radical transformation in popularity has been accompanied by much rejection, moral outrage, and critique. In the United States, where trap originates, this rejection has largely been articulated on aesthetic grounds, mirroring Pierre Bourdieu’s notion that cultural “tastes [...] function as markers of class” (Bourdieu 1972: 2):

Trap music was [...] not perceived as especially relevant or of good quality. Critics saw it as a vague, trivial and cheap genre, appropriate only for wild and excessive parties [...] Part of this rejection was based also on cultural prejudices that are similar to historical

This article uses both terms because in the broad Chilean public debate on this music they are understood interchangeably.

² An open-access resource funded by Chilean government agencies to track and assist in the promotion and study of Chilean music.

prejudices that were addressed to non-European cultures from the perspective of European civilization [...] (Kaluza 2018: 25).

In Chile, the reception of trap and the *música urbana* genres has followed this same trend of aesthetic critique based on prejudices related to social class and aesthetic values which have long been levelled against popular music forms (Jorquera & Godall 2018: 134-139; Barr-Melej 2017: 1-21 & 144-172). However, in recent years, as the genre has exploded in popularity, the critique of its artists has become increasingly alarmist. Scholars have singled out trap’s identification with urban marginality as one possible source for this rejection, as the genre has become strongly associated with the figure of the urban “flaite”. *Flaite* is a pejorative term used by urbanites in Santiago in order to make class-based distinctions, originally referring to a:

[...] un sujeto fuera de la norma [...] y que no consigue adaptarse por completo a la vida urbana. El imaginario social de este sujeto lo asocia como habitante de las periferias urbanas, por lo que se le tiene por marginal y peligroso, tanto en lo material como en lo simbólico. En años recientes, el término “flaite” ha sido apropiado por representantes del género musical urbano trap chileno, quienes, pese a la carga negativa del término, lo usan para reivindicar una “sonoridad flaite” a la que requieren como estrategia de autoidentificación (Bioletto-Bueno 2024: 63).

Thus, trap and *música urbana* in Chile have become intimately linked with the urban periphery of Santiago (Riquelme, Sule, Castillo & Nuñez 2022), and especially, with notions of black-market economies that are linked with urban street culture. Resultantly, youth-cultures become socially categorised as dangerous, due to their potential to create a contagion of “conductas marginales” (Angelcos, Roca & Cuadros 2020: 43). Such has been the moral condemnation of the trap and *música urbana* genres in Chile, that in 2024 there was a draft bill put through the Chilean Cámara de Diputadas y Diputados, named the *Proyecto de modificación de la ley N. 19.928*, aimed at censoring online platforms and prohibiting concerts that promote “la narcocultura y actividades delictuales” (Pérez Olea 2024), and which specifically named *música urbana* and the popularity of some of its key exponents as a site of concern:

Por ejemplo, algunas canciones de artistas urbanos chilenos narran hazañas y la vida de los narcotraficantes, logrando posicionarse en los primeros lugares de los rankings musicales del país, entre ellos Pablo Chill-e, King Savage, Jere Klein y Cris MJ (Pérez Olea 2024).

Undoubtedly, the attempted censorship of *música urbana* and trap in Chile relates to the fact that these are genres of music that deal with sordid urban realities, including the daily experience of violence and social marginalisation, drug-trafficking, and that glorify an aesthetic of “excessive” materialist consumption. Jillian Hernandez’s work on the “Aesthetics of Excess” is insightful here, as it situates this phenomenon as a profoundly critical, political act:

To exceed is to trespass. Gazes invested in neoliberal racial, class, gender, and sexual normativity perceive excess as a negative, a social liability or deviancy [...] Aesthetics of excess embrace abundance where the political order would impose austerity upon the racialized poor and working class, viewed as excessive as in unnecessary, unproductive [...] They flaunt the visibility of difference where the social order invests in the material erasure of Black and Latinx bodies through mass incarceration, detention, deportation, and other forms of social death (Hernández 2020: 11).

We propose that trap’s aesthetic of excess, in the Chilean case, functions as a retort to the increasing divide between rich and poor in Chile, which ascribes austerity to the poor and working classes, while cordoning off material wealth for the rich, in the context of one of the most profoundly unequal societies in the world (Mieris 2020). In Chill-E’s work, an aesthetic of excess calls attention to his poetics of urban-realism. As scholars of the genre have noted, from its very beginnings in the southern United States, the trap music genre has been entwined with its social context, and with the notion that it presents social lived experience from an under-privileged point of access to urban reality:

Sound cannot be separated from the practice of production in which it originally appears: those circumstances are somehow preserved inside the sound. The word trap (in the slang of Atlanta’s African American population) signifies a place, usually a typical wooden house from Atlanta’s devastated suburbs, where drugs and other illegal businesses take place, and where a certain lifestyle is practiced [...] Trap music was therefore deeply connected with the under privileged community in which it originally appeared and it described nothing but the cruel reality in which that music was produced [...] That is why trap music is, often perceived as devoid of deeper meaning, promoting immoral behavior, talking mostly about money, drugs, women, criminal and other stories of “real” life (Kaluza 2018: 25).

As we shall see in the following section, which focusses on trap’s adaptation to the Chilean environment, this connection with a poetics of under-privilege holds true. Thus, references to violence, drug-trafficking and other illegal practices are often considered as a form of “realism” by artists in the genre, a theme which this article will develop further in the following pages. However, it is notable that realism is identified as central to the discursive strategies of the trap and *música urbana* genres by scholars interested in the genre’s insights into the lived experience of urban marginality in Chile, particularly Riquelme, Sule, Castillo & Nuñez (2022), whose work at the intersection of sociology and psychology employs trap as an access-point through which to understand the urban experience of marginality. Adding to these incipient conversations, this article proposes that in the Chilean *música urbana* landscape, Pablo Chill-E’s music signals a poetics of truth-telling and of contradiction that reflects the realities of Chile’s neoliberal experiment. On the one hand, his work discursively appeals to, and therefore makes explicit, the logics of consensus capitalism, of materialist consumption, often expressed in a highly “excessive” aesthetic manner (Hernández 2020). At the same time, while celebrating his own entrepreneurial achievements, his music critiques capitalism’s present-tense social reality in contemporary Chile, characterising it as one of violence, lack of opportunity, social marginalisation, and generalised corruption, where criminality is a way to escape material deprivation.

To demonstrate how Pablo Chill-E’s music reveals unstated aspects of the Chilean neoliberal experiment, we focus on the music’s intermedial qualities, analysing its multiple discursive levels, which include, the musical, the lyrical, and the associated visuals displayed in video-clips (González 2022: 39). In our analysis, we also consider its self-reflexive dialogue with the economic conditions which produce it (González 2022: 39), specifically the streaming and home-studio self-production practices that scholars have identified as central to trap’s development and popularity (Muñoz 2018: 115; Villanueva 2023: 91-100). We argue that trap and *música urbana*’s reliance on streaming platforms and home-studio technologies have allowed the genre to side-step studio and major-label censorship, allowing for a sordid, uncensored and direct look at Chile’s social realities.

In the following pages we situate the rise of trap and *música urbana* in Chile, we summarise the state of scholarship on this phenomenon, before arguing that by identifying with trap as synonymous with a life of crime and corruption, Pablo Chill-E names the reality that decades of neoliberal social engineering naturalised in Chile as one based on competition and social conflict. After situating trap and *música urbana*’s journey from the margins to the centre of cultural discourse in Chile, and considering what scholars of this phenomenon have identified to date, we argue that Pablo Chill-E’s songs, lyrics and video-clips use the vernacular and generic conventions of the trap genre in order to hold a carnival hall mirror to contemporary Chilean society, highlighting the bifold logic of materialistic consumption and exclusion at its heart. Pablo Chill-E’s music does this in two ways: firstly, by embracing an attitude of material excess which is combined with outsider narratives of urban marginality via references to *flaites*, *maleantes*, *bandidos*, revealing what occurs when the logic of market capitalism goes unchecked; secondly, in select songs, by constructing an explicit social denunciation of the prevailing socio-economic model, which explicitly names the state, politicians, the media and the rich as authors of Chile’s maladies, and just as guilty of participating in criminal culture, except that their crimes go relatively unpunished due to class privilege.

Trap & *música urbana*: from Atlanta to Santiago de Chile

Trap is a sub-genre of hip-hop that arose from Atlanta in the 1990s. It is characterised by its sonorous and discursive relationship to the social context in which it originated, reflecting in its sound and lyrics the material realities that characterise its production and consumption in largely socio-economically marginalised communities (Súarez 2020, 45; Kaluza 2018: 24-25). Notably, it is the accessibility of home-studio technologies that have made possible its departure from the professional-studio mediated, largely New York and Los Angeles based, forms of hip-hop of the 1990s (Suárez 2020: 45). From its birth in Atlanta, through to its growth as a now-global phenomenon from 2009 until the present (Kaluza 2018, 25), it has been characterized as sounding “dark and grim” (Kaluza 2018, 25) due to its use of synthesizers and the distinctive sound of the Roland 808 Rhythm Composer drum machine, counterposed against an “uneasy tension between the natural and the artificial in the trap voice” (Duinker 2025: 7), an effect produced by the extensive use of auto-tune and pitch-shifting effects on the human voice. For its part, the human voice itself, in trap music, is characterised by Southern American regional speech, to the extent that it was labelled “mumble rap”:

The trap sound is regarded as improper; trap rappers are called mumble rappers. Mumble rappers are considered aurally illegible and lacking lyricism. The label of mumble rapper often construes their heavy Southern drawls as improper speech [...] The mumble is “speech breaking,” escaping proper language bounds, thus existing “on the edge of meaning” (Moten 2018, p. 130). If we consider the mumble as resistant auality containing a history, those who mumble understand one another (Crawford 2021: 3139).

In its spread to the Spanish-speaking world, artists have embraced this feature of the genre, where its auality reflects the urban environments that generate it. Scholars have noted that, in Spain, one of the first Spanish-language territories to embrace the genre, for instance, it has been linked most strongly to the urban environments of Madrid and Granada. Luque (2024) argues that Spanish trap critiqued prior forms of hip-hop by embracing local realities and expressions as the source for its poetic expression (rather than dialoguing with poetic traditions from the Spanish literary canon, as Luque argues occurred with early Spanish rap):

El rap más lírico es así, despreciado, y reemplazado por un rap que muestra una mayor cercanía a la realidad vivida en los barrios más humildes de España [...] Se trata, en suma, de un lirismo popular, sugerido, envuelto en una jerga de calle que parece ocultarlo todo, pero que no es sino la coraza de un arte verdaderamente poético (Luque 2024: 302).

In contradistinction to what Luque argues occurs in the Spanish phenomena, that prior musical expressions are rejected, Pablo Chill-E engages in a dialogue with the Chilean popular music traditions that antecede the explosion of trap and *música urbana* in the mid-2000’s, as evidenced by collaborations with *nueva canción* and hip-hop artists³, likely because these artists are also intimately linked to discourses of social justice and activism. These questions of social justice are also relevant in the Chilean case, because trap and *música urbana*’s ascent to the mainstream of pop-culture in Chile, has occurred in parallel with Chile’s *estallido social* (“social outburst”) of October 2019, and with the subsequent covid-19 pandemic.

Nevertheless, in its journey from Atlanta to Chile (via Spain)⁴, trap has maintained its distinctive genre characteristics. Where the sound has remained recognisable due to the instrumentation, effects and production, so too have the themes and images of the genre. For some scholars, this is because trap is intimately linked to the socio-economic circumstances from which it emerged, not only in terms of the aurality of the human voice and of the slang employed in the songs, but also due to the economic circumstances of its musical production, and its genre preoccupations (an emphasis on urban life, economic survival, hustling, etc):

Studios, where the trap sound first appears, were usually a side product of the surplus money of illegal activities, while local night-clubs, strip-clubs, and street-corners were usually places where trap music was consumed. Trap music was therefore deeply connected with the underprivileged community in which it originally appeared and it described nothing but the cruel reality in which that music was produced [...] That is why trap music is, often perceived as devoid of deeper meaning, promoting immoral behaviour, talking mostly about money, drugs, women, criminal and other stories of “real” life (Kaluza 2018: 25).

In its spread to Chile, the genre’s geographic identification with marginal suburbs and the urban lived-experience remains true, and it has become associated with specific areas of Santiago: Puente Alto, Pedro Aguirre Cerda and La Pintana, amongst others. Trap artists employ terms of self-identification that refer to social class, like *flaite*, sometimes varied as *flayte or flyte*, and they retain, and often highlight, the diction, accent and slang associated with *flaite* urban culture, which is celebrated in the songs. Where the term was once used in a discriminatory manner, trap and *música urbana* artists reclaim it, linking *flaite* culture to material survival in Chile’s neoliberal experiment. One example of how trap’s adaptation in Chile has combined the original generic conventions of relying on regional speech, dark, grim sonorities, the marked hi-hat of the Roland 808 Rhythm Machine, together with the narration of gritty urban underprivileged realities,

³ Although we cannot develop this further here, two examples demonstrate dialogue and continuity with prior expressions: 1) Pablo Chill-E’s collaboration with Ana Tijoux, “Dime Qué” (2024). Barros Cruz (2023) has identified Ana Tijoux as a central figure at the intersection of these practices, picking up on social, decolonial and environmental themes, as well as practices of solidarity with oppressed peoples (indigenous-nations, Palestine).; 2) The 2020 hit “Aburrido”, a collaboration with Quilapayún and Inti Illimani Histórico, two key exponents of the Nueva Canción Chilena.

⁴ Suárez (2020) deals with trap as a global expression, noting the genre’s influence on Spanish popular culture. Ernesto Castro (2019) explores the Spanish millennial embrace of trap in the shadow of the 2008 economic crisis. Molina (2020) documents the influence of Spanish trap on the Chilean scene.

including drug-trafficking and violence, but put into dialogue with a Chilean context can be found in Pablo Chill-E’s “Pablo Freestyle” (2021).

“Pablo Freestyle” embraces this *flaite* diction, as evidenced in the cut-off ends of words, marked in the lyrics by the use of the abbreviating apostrophe, as well as vocabulary from the Chilean criminal vernacular (*cana*, *sapear*, *frontear*, *paquearse*⁵), imagery (peine de banana⁶) and symbolism (clothing, sneakers, gold-chains), that speaks to themes of urban survival, black market economic practices and territoriality. Although these are international generic conventions, here they are bent to fit a specifically Chilean context, even naming the locality of Pedro Aguirre Cerda⁷, as well as referencing historical figures linked to the re-distribution of wealth in Chile, such as Salvador Allende:

No' escuchan en los patio' de la cana (free)
Mis compañero' tienen peine' de banana' (pr)
Y e' verda', no lo fronteamo'
No lo fronteamo' en Instagram porque sino sapeamo'
Ey, o no' revientan la casa
Pero lo' rati' culiao' no saben qué pasa
Ey, tampoco los paco' ni el GOPE
Free, libertad para los que
Para los que salieron a ponerle
Para los que salieron a paquearse
Para los que no le roban al pobre
A los doméstico' las pata' hay que volarle
Me río del fiscal, yo solo soy cantante
Ayudo a los niño', yo no soy maleante
Por culpa del Estado tuve que simpatizarme
Con ladroné' y traficante' (damn)
Porque así me crié (yeah)
P. A. C., Pedro Aguirre Cerda
El diamante sigue brillando
Aunque lo metai' en mierda
Tenemo' AK-47 como Salvador Allende y no soy de izquierda [...]
Siempre meti'o con puta' y ladroné' de carro
Venimo' del barro, tú sabe', soy guarro, yo te disparo (tra, tra)
Después salgo en el diario (pah-pah-pah-pah)
(Pablo Chill-E “Pablo Freestyle” 2021).

Apart from the above discussed set of sonorities proper to the trap genre, that is, a sound heavily based on the Roland 808 Rhythm Machine hi-hats, vocal manipulation with a minimal ambient accompaniment from synthesizers, which create an atmosphere reminiscent of an MDMA trip⁸, leaving substantial freedom for the trapper’s lyrics to be delivered with minimal melodic constraints, there are nevertheless other elements that help to distinguish it as a trap production. Amongst them, at the lyrical performance level, together with highlighting local diction and slang or vocabulary, the lyrical content

⁵ *Cana*: prison; *sapear*: to snitch; *frontear*: to show off; *ratis*: detectives; *paco*: police; *frontear*: to show; *paquearse*: from “paco” slang for police, translated in the video-clip as “serving time”.

⁶ *Peine de banana*: a bullet clip for an automatic weapon.

⁷ See also Chill-E’s “Komunas” (2020), which names a series of localities in Santiago associated with trap.

⁸ Intermedially, this sensation is evident in the video-clip’s associated visuals, which are set in a trailer (an allusion to mobile drug-labs), with slow-motion camera editing, and special effects such as burning eyes on the human faces.

portrays a largely socially marginalised urban experience, with a focus on economic survival. In this, Chill-E’s trap poetics respond to what scholars have recognised as discursive elements that distinguish the trap genre:

(a) la preminencia de la primera persona como yo poético; (b) un yo poético que hablará de sí mismo y de sus prácticas cotidianas, como una persona que se ha hecho a sí misma a partir de sus experiencias; (c) el yo poético desprecia el conocimiento que no provenga de la experiencia, lo preminente es la praxis diaria para adquirir conocimiento; (d) de la misma manera, es un yo poético que ha hecho frente a un ambiente hostil en un marco altamente competitivo que podemos identificar con el mercado; (e) el ambiente hostil se ve intensificado por los decorados a los que se refiere o desde los que se presenta el trapero o la traperera, en la medida en que harán, de una manera u otra, referencia a alguna zona marginal y a continuación a una zona acaudalada (Suárez 2020: 53).

In “Pablo Freestyle”, all the above conventions are registered. Yet they also reference Chilean present-tense and historical realities. Chill-E explicitly names the government as responsible for the urban realities which force youth towards the criminal economy, as the result of experiences directly lived by the trapper, which he characterises as “mierda”: *Por culpa del Estado tuve que simpatizarme / Con ladrone’ y traficante’ (damn) / Porque así me crié (yeah) / P.A.C, Pedro Aguirre Cerda / El diamante sigue brillando / Aunque lo metai’ en mierda*. Suárez’s typology remains true throughout the song. The use of first-person singular is central to the lyrics. The lyrics highlight Chill-E’s personal experiences as someone who has thrived despite a hostile, competitive environment, characterised as an unbridled marketplace. However, there are also some notable departures. At times the first-person singular becomes the first-person plural *nosotros*, “nos escuchan”, “tenemo’”, linking to a broader social context, where the experience of urban survival is something that is experienced communally, as part of a social group.

Not only is the first-person used in the plural, creating a sense of community, but the trapper, while creating a narrative about the way he finds himself enmeshed in a criminal economy, also moralises the range of acts possible in it, speaking of a code of honour in a society where, at least intertextually⁹, corruption and criminality are widespread:

*Free, libertad para los que
[...] Para los que no le roban al pobre
A los doméstico’ las pata’ hay que volarle
Me río del fiscal, yo solo soy cantante
Ayudo a los niño’, yo no soy maleante
[...] Aquí no le venden pasta (no), recuerde que somo’ rasta’
Vendiste papelina, si vendía’ esa gilá’ 7-7 a tu familia
(Pablo Chill-E, “Pablo Freestyle”, 2021).*

For Chill-E the limits are around the victims, the calibre of the crimes committed, and the terrain in which they occur. At the start of the song, Chill-E calls for freedom for

⁹ A reference to the opening verse of Chill-E’s “Facts” (2018): “¿Quieren saber por qué hay corrupción? Senadores ganando más que un profesor”. In “Robin Hood” (2023) Chill-E develops criminality as justice in a society where material need is widespread: *Cuando el cora’ e’ grande, la olla e’ de goma / Y toda mi gente que coma, que coma / Soy Robin Hood, en el hood ‘tamo Robin / Finesse, mi trapping da muerte y corona (Skr, skrr) / Chillando las goma’, robo un dealer y regalo las droga’ / Cuando el cora’ e’ grande, tú hambre e’ mi hambre / Primito del barrio que coma, que coma (Tra)* (“Robin Hood” Pablo Chill-E 2023)

those imprisoned in “cana”, but it is qualified to “los que no le roban al pobre” and further balanced out by the proclamation that “A los doméstico’ las pata’ hay que volarle”, where domésticos references thieves specialised in home-robberies, the song calls for street-justice to be served against those that steal from the neighbourhood’s inhabitants. The state attorney becomes an object of ridicule for focussing on *música urbana* artists rather than the broader criminal atmosphere –which includes institutional corruption–, and Chill-E references his social work, “ayudo a los niño”, through the *Coordinadora Social ShiShiGang*¹⁰, which operates where the state is not present: in the barrios. With respect to drugs, Chill-E clarifies *aquí no le venden pasta, / recuerde que somo’ rasta*, in reference to pasta base, a particularly harmful byproduct of cocaine production, and warning that anyone in the neighbourhood caught selling it will be brought to justice: *Vendiste papelina, / si vendía’ esa gilá’ 7-7 a tu familia*¹¹. In turn, the following verse refers to Chile’s highly sensationalised media landscape which is central in the creation of political and social discourses:

Te disparo (tra, tra)
Después’ salgo en el diario (pah-pah-pah-pah)
Dejamo’ los carro veloz (brr)
Ey, pesan nuestra’ voce’ (yeah, ah)
(Pablo Chill-E “Pablo Freestyle” 2021).

In this song, the trapper gives voice to a poetics of unexpurgated urban reality, which is counterposed against media discourses. In this light, Chill-E’s reflection *te disparo (tra, tra) / Después salgo en el diario* refers to the generic conventions of the trapper identified by Suárez (2018): trapping in the first-person in reference to his own struggles and experiences in a hostile environment. Chill-E’s trap creates a territorially situated and unexpurgated locus of enunciation which remits to, and gives voice to, a reality that is censored by Chile’s governing classes and institutions: the reality of Santiago’s socio-economically depressed neighbourhoods. To achieve this, Chill-E references Chile’s highly privatised news media ecology, subtly critiquing Chile’s mediatised dominant narratives of social control around issues of juvenile delinquency, before adding “pesan nuestra’ voce’”, a reflection on trap’s social function as a genre that permits truth-telling by way of a poetics of urban-realism, which side-steps the voices of experts (criminologists, sociologists), focusing instead on lived experience.

This distinction between the trapper’s voice and reality projected against that of the news media references the use of youth-crime as a sensationalist, political discourse. Scholars Tsukame (2016) and Hoecker (2010) have identified this as a recurring trope in Chile’s news media from the 1990s, until the late 2010s, which serves political interests, largely centred around the creation of criminalised others which the state then promises to control, with very few practical or wholistically designed results (Hoecker 2010), producing an endless cycle of discourses of crime (Tsukame 2016). Against this maelstrom of information, trap produces a visceral urban realism which gives agency to those voices that are marginalised by the media and criminalised by the government.

As our reading of “Pablo Freestyle” (2020) has shown, although it has retained many of the generic conventions that have come to define trap globally, in its adaptation

¹⁰ A non-profit, community organisation which produces workshops and events for youth in marginalised areas of Santiago. It has also assisted in national emergencies, including the 2024 Valparaíso region fires. It was co-founded by Pablo Chill-E, Matías Toledo and Barbero Exótico, residents of Puente Alto. In 2024, Toledo became mayor of Puente Alto, releasing it from 25 years of right-wing control. <https://www.instagram.com/coordinadorasocialshishigangof/?hl=es>

¹¹ “7-7” is translated in the video-clip as a “hit”.

to the Chilean environment, trap continues to be enmeshed in the social, economic, cultural and productive contexts from which it arises. Part of this connection to its social context relates to the fact that trap, at least in Chile, is a largely self-produced and therefore a more direct, uncensored genre of popular music. The effect of this intermedial reality of self-production, is that trappers can operate with minimal interference from political, moral and social codes, choosing the aesthetic parameters and lyrical content of their songs, as evidenced in the video-clip, sound production and lyrical content of “Pablo Freestyle” (2021), which flaunts its self-produced status. Likewise, at the level of consumption, Pablo Chill-E distributes his music and video-clips almost directly to his listeners, via streaming platforms YouTube and Spotify, and in return, monetises their views directly, bypassing the ecology of the music industry’s major labels, which had dominated the popular music scene in Chile in prior decades (González 2022: 42-45)¹².

This lack of censorship has allowed the genre to take on a sense of realism, which scholars like Kaluza (2018) have related to Michel Foucault’s theorisation of “parrhesia” or “fearless speech” that is characterised as “completely and absolutely real. It is real because it is completely and absolutely fearless, because it dares to tell things as they are, no matter the consequences” (Kaluza 2018: 26). In the section that follows we consider how Pablo Chill-E’s work in “My Blood” (2019) and “Facts” (2018) takes up this parrhesiastic function, producing a discourse of urban realism that speaks back to the mainstream of Chilean society from the mirror provided by the generic conventions of the trap and *música urbana* genres.

Trap and *música urbana* in Chile: urban-realism between testimony and “capitalist-realism”

In response to the increasingly sensationalist public debate that led to the 2024 *Proyecto de modificación de la ley N. 19.928*, Pablo Chill-E, stated in an interview that realism is a trope that is central to the genre: “No nos pueden culpar a nosotros [...] nuestra música igual es fuerte, cantamos de violencia y lo que pasa en las calles, lo que nadie muestra lo mostramos nosotros, nuestras letras son crudas, muestran realidad” (Calderón 2023). Taking seriously this declaration that the work of trap music and *música urbana* is to show unspoken realities, we propose that this notion of trap’s urban realism, can be understood to have a dual meaning when it comes to popular music. As Mark Fisher has noted, in pop-music, the ‘real’ connotes the following:

First, it means authentic, uncompromised music that refuses to sell out to the music industry and soften its message for crossover. 'Real' also signifies that the music reflects a 'reality' constituted by late capitalist economic instability, institutionalized racism, and increased surveillance and harassment of youth by the police (Fisher 2009: 10).

In line with Fisher, we propose that, in Chile, the trap and *música urbana* genres, in their lyrics, music and related audio-visual productions, create a poetics of urban truth-telling which reflects a series of broad social changes which have come to characterise Chilean society in recent years: trap’s realism becomes a form of testimony. Thus, in the following pages, we follow Natalia Bieletto-Bueno’s invitation to “problematizar la ontología de la canción urbana como algo más que una mera ficción” (Bieletto-Bueno 2024: 80) and to explore “la posibilidad de que también sea un testimonio a través del cual

¹² Villanueva (2023) and Muñoz Tapia (2018) argue that the rise of trap and *música urbana* in Latin America is tied to digital streaming platforms, which enable independent production and distribution outside traditional major labels.

se simboliza la experiencia de la marginalización social” (Bieletto-Bueno 2024: 80). However, it is also enmeshed in a poetics of contradiction. This contradiction refers to the tension between, on one hand, the repeated articulation of a fierce social critique of Chile’s neoliberal present, characterised in his songs as one of social marginalisation, endemic corruption and economic exclusion, while his music also appeals to materialistic discourses typical of the trap genre, albeit expressed through a distinctly Chilean urban lens. These discourses, which are centred on the glorification of individual entrepreneurship, and conspicuous consumption of wealth, in trap terminology, “trapping” and “joseo”¹³, are considered here as an expression of what British cultural theorist Mark Fisher coined as “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2009, 16-20), which names the feeling that: “What we are dealing with [...] is a deeper, far more pervasive sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility” (Fisher 2009, 7), which results in “a kind of super-identification with capital at its most pitilessly predatory” (Fisher 2009, 12):

A pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education [...] Over the past thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a ‘business ontology’ in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in society [...] should be run as a business. (Fisher 2009: 16-17)

Pablo Chill-E’s work creates a subversive visceral urban realist discourse within the aesthetic phenomenon that Fisher has described as capitalist realism, by embracing a critical “aesthetic of excess” (Hernández 2020: 11) which undermines the dominant narratives of neoliberal society, which reserves this excess wealth for the economic elite, who enjoy it in the relative privacy and safety of the exclusive zones of the highly segregated city that is Santiago (Link, Valenzuela & Fuentes: 2015). One powerful example of this poetics of contradiction between trap’s capitalist-realist and visceral urban realist modes can be found in the song “My Blood” (Polimá Westcoast feat. Pablo Chill-E 2019), where Chill-E’s verse states:

Y si es por bienestar a mí no me importa gastar
Dejen, déjenme pegar nadie va a tener que robar
Voy a poner a to’ los niños de la pobla a cantar
Espero cambiar el mundo
Aunque me cuesten los segundos de mi vida
Ser Eazy-E y sin pegarme el sida
El tráfico, los robos, los panas que se suicidan
Te tienen hoy en día a ti escuchándome en tarima
Si te contara un par de historias de la calle te da pena
Cómo la delincuencia se expande como gangrena
Pero a mí no puedes odiarme porque soy el que relato
De cómo los menores se aburrieron de andar pato
Si tienen que robar que no sea a ningún barrio
Nunca le robes a la gente de tu vecindario
Si tienen que hacer mal, que sea mal necesario
Y que es obvio que los perros envidian a los sicarios
(Polimá Westcoast feat. Pablo Chill-E “My Blood” 2019).

¹³ “Josear: Hacer dinero, moverse, ver los métodos “para poder hacer dinero. Viene del término inglés hustler [buscarse la vida]” (Molina 2020: 269). “Trapping”, “becomes a metaphor for self-determination – where people can make money and provide for themselves and their communities–. [...] through the selling of drugs and as a sound [...]” (Crawford 2020: 3136).

In this excerpt, at the lyrical level, despite the allusion to spending on consumer goods at the beginning of the verse, we can see the poetics of urban realism take the fore, with the trapper instructing listeners about his intention to “cambiar el mundo”, something which the trapper will achieve by means of a poetics of urban-realism: *Si te contara un par de historias de la calle te da pena / Cómo la delincuencia se expande como gangrena*. Addressing his lyrics to any ordinary listener, he warns *Pero a mí no puedes odiarme porque soy el que relato / De cómo los menores se aburrieron de andar pato*, implying that trap did not cause the phenomenon of youth crime as it is, in effect, a product of poverty, or “andar pato”.



Figure 2: Pablo Chill-E in the video-clip for “My Blood” at 1:23: *Soy el que relato de como los jóvenes se aburrieron de andar pato*.

Like in “Pablo Freestyle” (2021), there is in this expression of urban realism, also a moral message, this time addressed to Chill-E’s peers who are mentioned at the beginning as “los niños de la pobla”: *Si tienen que robar que no sea a ningún barrio / Nunca le robes a la gente de tu vecindario / Si tienen que hacer mal, que sea mal necesario*, that is, if forced to commit crime, to do it away from one’s neighbourhood and to do it consciously.



Figure 3: Polimá Westcoast and Pablo Chill-E in the video-clip for “My Blood” at 1:25: *Si tienen que robar que no sea en ningún barrio, nunca le robes a la gente de tu vecindario*.

Taken intermedially, the song’s video-clip, excerpts of which are shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3 above, provides us a broader context through which to interpret the lyrics: it juxtaposes a street scene, shot outside of an urban prison (Figure 1), with Chill-E gesturing to empty pockets, with scenes of obscene material wealth in an exclusive, luxury brand shopping centre where Chill-E and co-star Polimá Westcoast are shrouded in jewels, clothes and shopping bags (Figure 2). Here the contradiction between the social

indictment, and the foregrounding of material wealth makes clear that the personal motive of the trapper to gain economic well-being (“si es por bienestar”) can also be interpreted as a profoundly political indictment of Chile’s class-system: *si tienen que hacer mal que sea mal necesario*, if you must steal due to poverty, steal from the rich. This contradiction is further underlined by the sonic element of the song, which combines a bass-heavy trap rhythm with Roland 808 hi-hats, with a repeated and heavily altered sample of a melody which sounds like it could be a Nueva Canción political anthem¹⁴, hinting at Chile’s history of struggles for the re-distribution of wealth.

Chill-E’s 2018 song “Facts” makes a clear case for trap’s urban realism as truth-telling and social critique. Musically, the song highlights a typical trap, Roland 808 style rhythm, juxtaposed with a repeated sample of religious-style choral vocals, leaving ample room for Chill-E’s trapping. The video-clip for “Facts” (2018), released on the eve of Pope Francis’ visit to Chile in January 2018 reinforces the religious theme, with Chill-E dressed in white, positioned as if praying, asking and answering the following questions:

¿Quieren saber por qué hay corrupción?
Senadores ganando más que un profesor
¿Quieren saber por qué hay delincuencia?
El paco opresor no le tiene paciencia
La gente morena, la de población
Los niños que no tienen pa’ colación
Tantos millones pa’ ver a ese papa
Los pobres no comen con una oración
Pa’ colmo el católico de clase media
Sólo podrá verlo por televisión (ja, ja)
Sáquense la venda de los ojos gente (por favor)
(Pablo Chill-E “Facts” 2018).

Together with a change in the tone of the lyrics, which become much more pointed, a sharp visual cut at the start of the second verse switches to Chill-E dressed as a priest, stating stronger truths, aimed at Chile’s television news media, accusing it of complicity with power:

Hey, televisión, tele basura
No muestran las violaciones de los cura’
Cuando un político toma y maneja
Tampoco cuando el pobre tiene una queja
Martín Larraín tú eres un delincuente (¡asesino!)
Asesino al igual que to’ el que te defiende
Piñera también un peligro latente (¡ladrón!)
La gente no entiende, este longi les miente
Van a salir con que soy comunista
No sé de política, yo soy artista
Yo solo plasmo todo lo que veo
Discursos políticos, yo ni uno creo
Vengo del Chile, del Chile feo
Dónde niños nacen solo pa’ ser reos
Pa’ ser de la constru’, pa’ ser de la calle
(Pablo Chill-E “Facts” 2018).

¹⁴ Despite this, the sample is from “Sal y agua” (1997) by Mexican cumbia band *Los Llayras*.

It is notable that a song from a genre lambasted in public discourse for its lack of morality and connections to the criminality, makes here, via the urban-realism of the trapper’s point of view, “yo solo plasmo todo lo que veo”, an incredible indictment of Chile’s political class, signalling also the complicity of the nation’s media in maintaining the *statu quo* for a corrupt social elite, while it creates discourses that seek to persecute criminality and corruption at the lower socio-economic level. Here Chill-E’s truth-telling is still based on the personal experience that Suárez (2020) identifies as a trope of the trap genre, “vengo del Chile, del Chile feo”, so as if in anticipation of any critiques, Chill-E refers to the statistics made public in numerous reports¹⁵ that stated Chile’s status as one of the most profoundly unequal nations in the years leading up to the 2019 *estallido social*, *Y el detalle / Es que en la clase alta está la mayoría de dinero del país / Y eso lo dicen las estadísticas, los porcentajes / Estoy hablando con base*. Returning to his own lived experience, he declares *El otro detalle / Es que hay más pasta base en la población / Que libros en un colegio / Antes quería ser Pablo Escobar / Ahora solo quiero ser alguien mejor*.



Figure 4: Pablo Chill-E in the video-clip for “Facts” at 1:43. During this sequence Chill-E speaks directly to the camera and the audience.

The poetics of urban realism and truth-telling in relation to trap becomes most apparent in the third verse. In the video-clip, represented in Figure 3 above, Chill-E appears shirtless and tattooed, or in a white t-shirt as himself, delivering the most direct lines of the song, reflecting on his role as trapper and mouthpiece for Santiago’s urban youth (anticipating the media censure of trap and *música urbana* artists as criminals):

A mí no me tapan la boca
Me llevan la yerba pa’ meterse coca
Los pacos, los ratis, también el congreso
Han roba’o más que mis compadres presos
Cuicos culia’os repartanse el queso
Tu hijito en falopa se gasta tus pesos
Por eso a taitita yo siempre le rezo
Pa’ que la flaca no me de su beso (muac)
Solo le pido a Dios
Que lo injusto no me sea indiferente¹⁶
Porque el gobierno la maquilla
Pero mata, roba y miente

¹⁵ For instance, the 2018 OECD report which labelled Chile as one of the most unequal nations.

¹⁶ These lines directly quote León Gieco’s “Solo le pido a dios” (1978).

Esto es ojo por ojo
Y también diente por diente
Por salvarnos unos pesitos
Nos tildan de delincuentes
(Pablo Chill-E “Facts” 2018).

In the above verse, the politics of trap in Chile are laid clear. Trap is the product of a social environment in which socio-economic and cultural exclusion have been naturalised into the neoliberal order, where no viable political alternative (“discursos políticos yo ni uno creo”) is possible, because it was systematically annihilated over 17 years of dictatorship, and three decades of neoliberal rule. At the same time as society has descended into a generalised state of corruption (*Los pacos, los ratis, también el congreso / Han roba’o más que mis compadres presos / Cuicos culia’os repartanse el queso*) akin to trap’s own neighbourhood as black-marketplace. Nevertheless, it is clear in the song and its associated video-clip that the trapper has the power to name this reality, calling out the hypocrisy of appeals to moralist and legalist critiques articulated in the media around the notion of “delincuencia”, when in effect the crimes of the social elite go unpunished. Although “Facts” dates back to 2018, a year before the *estallido social* of October 2019, this truth-telling facet of Chill-E’s career as trapper, urban-realist and social critic has remained an important element of his artistic expression, recurring in multiple songs, including his collaboration with Ana Tijoux, “Dime Qué” (2024), where he reflects on his status as someone who states the unsayable:

¿Pa’ qué vamos a meterno’ más adentro? (Ah)
Te estoy diciendo cosas que nadie quiere escuchar (yah)
No hay peor ciego que el que no quiere ver
Y por eso mi amigo ahora está en un mural (descansa en paz)
(Pablo Chill-E “Dime Qué” 2024).

Conclusion

This article has approached the phenomenon of trap and *música urbana* in Chile by charting the many social debates that have accompanied the genre’s shift from the very margins and underground of cultural discourse to the mainstream of cultural consumption. Contributing to ongoing debates on Trap and *música urbana*, we have argued that the Chilean expression of these genres maintains many of the conventions that unite trap expressions from across the globe, giving the genre a sense of consistency and intertextuality, while also adapting these conventions to the Chilean context.

Focussing on Pablo Chill-E, and considering the intermedial praxis of his music –that is, the multiple layers of signification that underlie his songs, including the lyrics, the video-clips and visuals, as well as the relationship of the recorded song with its socio-economic context and the economics of production and distribution–, we have argued that in Chile the trap genre has produced a poetics of contradiction. This poetics is characterised by an uncensored truth-telling which we have termed urban-realism, and an embrace of material excess.

Through a close reading of select songs, we have argued that these two traits, truth-telling and an aesthetics of material excess, function together to produce a fierce social critique of neoliberal Chile’s extreme social inequalities, and of the ways in which these inequalities have been naturalised by hypocritical media narratives that sensationalise youth-crime, while the nation faces an endemic corruption at the institutional and governmental levels, and the divide between rich and poor continues to

worsen. In the face of this, the artist’s choice to flaunt symbolic objects of wealth (gold chains, brand-name clothes, luxury vehicles) in marginalised suburbs, and to name criminality as a strategy of survival for marginalised classes, subverts Chile’s post-1990 narratives about its status as a social democracy aligned with free-market values.

At the same time as Chill-E names social realities, the artist engages in truth-telling when he names criminality as the *modus operandi* of Chile’s political classes, in juxtaposition with media narratives that focus on youth crime. The genre’s contradiction, between the articulation of explicit social critiques, on the one hand, and on the other its celebration of a materialistic aesthetics of excess, lays clear the fault lines of Chile’s neoliberal experiment: Chile’s have-nots have tired of waiting for the political class to represent their interests.

Chile’s Trap and *música urbana* genres articulate the political, social and economic needs of a sector of society that has often been the object of political, sociological and media narratives since Chile’s post-1990 return to democracy but have seldom been the originators of these discourses. Thus, instead of seeking to censor Trap and *música urbana*, Chile’s political class would best serve their constituents by paying attention to the complaints, the aspirations and frustrations expressed in Chile’s most contemporary, uncensored, unfiltered, direct and popular musical genre.

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